

***The Institution of Engineers, Australia; Sydney Division
Engineering Heritage Committee***

Oral History Program: Biographical Notes

Ross GORDON (1915 -)

Civil Engineer

- Birth & Family:** Born in Allison, near Dungog NSW on 12 October 1915. Father a schoolteacher at small school in Scotland who migrated in 1906 due to health reasons. Mother from Gulgong, NSW. A sister and two brothers.
- Education:** Primary education at Nemingha and Fairy Meadow. Taught by his father. Secondary education at Wollongong 3 years then Canterbury Boys High School (repeated 5th year due to father's death). Leaving Certificate in 1933.
- Qualifications:** Civil Engineering Certificate, Sydney Technical College, 1935
- Memberships:** Fellow of the Institution of Engineers
- Awards:** Received medal for 25 years service as Commissioned Officer
- Work History:** Began as a Trainee Engineer in the NSW Railways on November 1, 1934. First few years practical experience working as labourer on Transport House and Circular Quay Station in 1936.
- 1937 Initially survey work then in Design Office, designing bridges for the Sandy Hollow Railway line.
- May 1939 worked on construction of Sutherland-Cronulla Railway line.
- October 1939 enlisted in CMF, studied Tactics Engineering and Military Law.
- May 1940 final (5th) year of technical studies, enlisted in the Army – railway construction and maintenance group.
- Originally posted to France but on 12 October 1940 ended up in the Middle East for 3 years. Involved building railway on eastern bank of Suez Canal. Next posting was in Lebanon, railway line to Tripoli, being last link from Cairo to London. Still a lieutenant at this stage but eventually promoted to Captain whilst in the Trans-Jordan.
- 1943 returned to Australia as second in command of group. Worked on North-South road from Alice Springs to Darwin from October 1943 to January 1944. Attended senior officers training course. Returned to Northern Territory – sent to Kapooka, then onto Morotai and Borneo. While in Borneo built railways as well as roads.
- November 1945 returned home, demobilisation, returned to work with railways and continued his degree at Technical College.
- January 1946 Assistant Engineer Grade 3 – Resident Engineer on construction of new Hawkesbury River Bridge. Attended lectures 5 nights a week. Met future wife, Una Mary Street, short courtship and married Easter 1946.
- August 1947 transferred to Dubbo as District Engineer. Found techniques were backward, improved on this especially with mechanical equipment.
- September 1948 transferred to Sydenham to take over Number 1 track district to ensure the tracks were maintained. Worked under John

Degotardi. He and Alex Coote lobbied and set up a school to train railway gangs and engineers. Chief Engineer opened the live-in school.

April 1951 promoted to Engineer Class 3 – Divisional Engineer went back to Dubbo, main job to maintain the tracks putting in more sleepers, particularly hard wood. Later on he introduced concrete sleepers. Lobbied to get mechanical equipment to be used rather than manual labour.

May 1954 transferred to Goulburn also in the same year seconded as Lt. Colonel in Supplementary Reserve.

1957 back to Sydenham as District Inspector under Mr Degotardi. Returned to Dubbo for a further 4 years, then for 4 years to Goulburn which was a more important track district. Arranged for spraying to be done by trucks rather than by hand. Freed up workers time to put in sleepers and set a quota for the gangs.

Returned to Sydney as New Construction Engineer for metropolitan area. Job involved buildings, as well as four platforms at Sydney Station, Diesel Depot at Temora, rail houses at Enfield and tunnels for water pipes. Metropolitan system was in poor condition since the war, difficulties getting back up to standard.

Career path to being Engineer of Track Construction, mechanising trackwork and providing Fairmont Track cars to transport workers.

In 1962 undertook a 14 weeks world tour to study mechanised track maintenance equipment in England, France, Germany, Austria, Canada and USA. Came back and wrote papers to get bigger machines that could do more tamping per hour.

November 1962 Engineer I/C Track and Structures. Derailment of the Daylight Express in Wagga. Worked to fix problem and reported to Hawkins about the problem.

October 1966 became Assistant Chief Civil Engineer, Maintenance. He and Alec Coote set up course for students to get field experience. Took a very hands-on role in this.

November 1968 position as Deputy Chief Civil Engineer. Involved in Eastern Suburbs railway line.

July 1973 Became General Manager (Chief Civil Engineer), at Way and Works.

January 1974 became Commissioner of Public Transport even though he was only person who knew about railways. Also put in charge of personnel.

2 July 1980 Gordon resigned, after the Public Transport Commission was dissolved on 30 June 1980 (along with his position as Commissioner). He retired 12 weeks before he turned 65 years old.

His mark on the Railways was education and training for engineers and the introduction of modern machinery and contract workers. Brought in the electrification of Gosford and Newcastle line.

Spent the years after retirement helping his wife, reading books and looking after his share portfolio, and remained a fellow of the Institution of Engineers.

Prepared by Freda Garnsey, 11 November 2002 from oral history interview conducted on 2 March 2000